

Ira G. Needles



When Ira G. Needles arrived in the Waterloo region in 1925 to take a job as assistant sales manager at B.F. Goodrich, he hid the fact that he was university educated. At the time, the business world considered it “snooty” to have a higher education.

His education didn’t hurt him, however, and Needles gradually rose within the ranks of the tire giant, and by 1951 he was appointed president of B.F. Goodrich Canada.

However, in the summer of 1956, Needles’ two separate worlds - industry and academia - would finally come together in a radical speech he made to the Rotary Club of Kitchener-Waterloo. Needles’ speech would ultimately transform the nature of education in Canada.

During the talk, entitled “WANTED: 150,000 Engineers – The Waterloo Plan,” Needles presented a new kind of education that would involve studies in the classroom as well as training in industry.

Needles’ thoughts on co-operative education, while controversial at the time, eventually helped place the University of Waterloo among the top universities in North America.

“As his name suggests he has a way of getting people moving. The reason is rather simple: he doesn’t care very much who gets the credit for it,” an official once said.

The idea was to get universities and industry working together to fill the growing need for skilled graduates. This pragmatic approach to education would counter the historic reality of university being restricted to the privileged classes.

It was Needles, under the encouragement of his B.F. Goodrich colleague Gerald Hagey, who helped found the University of Waterloo. When Needles made his pivotal speech in 1956, Hagey was the president of Waterloo College. The college, now Wilfrid Laurier University, had recently decided to open a science faculty in what would become known as the Waterloo College Associate Faculties in 1957 - and later the University of Waterloo.

“He was not only a member of that small group of men who met ... to consider the possibility of establishing a university here; he was also the guiding light, the spark plug if you like, that ignited the enthusiasm of the whole group,” said former UW president Bert Matthews.

After helping to found the University, Needles served as chairman of its board of governors between 1956 and 1966 before becoming chancellor for nine years.

It was a remarkable career for a man born in Iowa in 1893. He went to Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where he completed a post-graduate fellowship in business administration. He began working with B.F. Goodrich in 1916 in Akron, Ohio.

After moving to Waterloo County to take his post as assistant sales manager, he went on to become vice-president of sales, president, and chairman of the board before resigning in 1960.

It is perhaps less well known that during the Second World War, Needles served as a technical advisor to the federal government on the rationing of rubber, a strategic material in wartime. He was also a founder of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival where his son, William Needles became a renowned actor.

Needles and his wife Marian, had a daughter Luanna Jones and another son Myron. He died on January 6, 1986 at the age of ninety-two.

Photo courtesy of Waterloo Public Library.